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ABSTRACT

A longitudinal study of English acquisition by a Vietnamese mother and her daughter is reported. Subjects of this study are Lan, a young Vietnamese woman in her late twenties, and her daughter Than, who was four years old at the time this study began. Neither knew any English when they resettled in Texas in the summer of 1975 after fleeing from Vietnam in the spring of that year. English acquisition began through interaction with the American family sponsors, with whom they continue to maintain close social ties. Vietnamese continues to be the language of the home, but English is developing through the mother's contacts at work and frequent visits with the American sponsors. Than is enrolled in an English-speaking school. A wide range of syntactic structures are examined: the adult acquisition sequencing of the mother is compared with that of her child. Findings have implications for a theory of language acquisition, both first and second, as well as for pedagogical considerations in teaching English as a second language. (Author)

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ACQUISITION OF ENGLISH BY A VIETNAMESE MOTHER AND CHILD

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Of the numerous studies in the acquisition of sets of grammatical markers by first and second language learners of English conducted over the past few years, the one significant gap is in longitudinal studies of second language learners of English. Only a few have been conducted for children (Kessler and Idar, 1977; Rosansky, 1977; Hakuta, 1974). None have been reported for adult second language acquisition of English.

Complementary to any longitudinal studies, a significant set of cross-sectional studies has been reported over the past several years for both children and adults acquiring English as a second Language (L2). Representative are those of Krashen and his colleagues (1978) for adults and the collaborative work of Dulay and Burt (1974) for children. These and other cross-sectional studies, together with critiques such as that by Andersen (1977), have contributed significantly to an understanding of the language acquisition process for second language performers. Data obtained from extensive speech samples of speakers of both Indo- and non-Indo-European languages all in various stages of acquiring English as L2 argue convincingly for a natural order of acquisition of specific morphological or syntactic structures of English. Under conditions of language acquisition, the creative construction process of internationalizing the rules of the target language grammar appears to be similar for both children and adults (Krashen, 1977).

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Cross-sectional studies, unquestionably valuable in obtaining an overall picture of the acquisition of English, tend to obscure the individual's unique process in internalizing the target language. Researchers utilizing cross-sectional designs consistently point out that individual sequencing of language structures does not necessarily follow an invariant order observed for a group. However, Hatch and Wagner-Gough (1976) point out that looking at data longitudinally can provide a general pattern of acquisition orders for L2 structures. Specifically, a learner may acquire A before B and both before C, but others may reverse the order or follow various permutations. Utilizing a longitudinal design, Brown (1973) has documented the initially erratic but gradually rising curve of performance of three children acquiring English as a first language.

The focus of this paper is on the acquisition of English as a second language by a Vietnamese mother and daughter, presenting a model of adult second language performance in relationship to a child's acquisition of English longitudinally over a period of six months for the mother and ten months for the child.

Relevant to this study is the distinction between language acquisition and language learning observed in the 'Monitor Model' proposed by Krashen (1977, 1973) for adult second language performers. The principal claim of this model is that the adult, unlike the child, has two routes for internalizing L2 rules. The first is language acquisition, described as an implicit, subconscious system very similar to the process children use in acquiring first and second languages. Not influenced by overt teaching, this process is triggered by meaningful interaction in the target language.

This system operates when attention is directed to conveying and understanding messages rather than to the grammatical form of the utterance. Language learning, the second system possibly available to adults but not to children, is the result, as Krashen (1978) describes it, of either a formal language teaching situation or a self-study program. As Krashen and Seliger (1975) explain, such situations are characterized by the presence of feedback or error correction and 'rule isolation' or the presentation of specific aspects of the L2 grammar one at a time. In other words, overt teaching of grammar rules may facilitate internalizing of the L2 system. The Monitor Model hypothesizes that this learning process is available to the adult L2 performer only as a monitor, making use of the conscious grammar to alter the output of the acquired system. Access to the learning process is thought to occur around puberty (Lenneberg, 1967). Even though the adult's internalization of L2 rules may be facilitated by learning, the acquisition process continues to be available. Bailey, Madden and Krashen (1974) evaluated adult ESL performance for eight grammatical morphemes, reporting a difficulty order similar to that seen in young children acquiring English as a second language (Dulay and Burt, 1973). Similarity in the difficulty orders has been taken as evidence for similarity in language processing between children and adults, or, more precisely, evidence for the language acquisition process.

Corroboration of these cross-sectional studies with longitudinal ones is needed, however, to strengthen the argument for natural orders of difficulty and universal language processing strategies independent of language background and age of the second language peformer.

In the present longitudinal study of the acquisition of English by a Vietnamese mother and her daughter, the following research questions are posed:

1) Do the mother and daughter reflect a similar sequencing in the acquisition of English grammatical morphemes?
2) Is the sequence of acquisition observed over time similar to that observed in cross-sectional studies of both children and adults?
3) Are strategies of language acquisition operating that indicate acquisition of English as L2 draws on the same process and closely approximates first language acquisition of English?

An earlier study by Kessler and Idar (1977) investigates the acquisition of selected syntactic features from the onset of syntax for the daughter, who was age 4,6 at the time the study began. A longitudinal study over a 12-month period found that the acquisition order of a set of grammatical morphemes closely paralleled aspects of both L1 and L2 sequences for children acquiring English.

By extending this longitudinal study to include the child's mother, an examination of similarities and differences between child and adult second language acquisition can be made while at the same time, because of the family relationship, maintaining a degree of control with regard to first language background, the events that led to the onset of the second language, the continuing use of the first language in the home, the similarity of second language input from English-speaking friends of the family. Differences are in the ages and consequent cognitive development of the mother and child, the domains in which English is

acquired: work for the mother, school for the daughter. Social-affective variables also differ with age and the process of re-adjustment from life in Vietnam to that in the United States.

SUBJECTS:

Subjects of this study are Lan, a young Vietnamese woman in her late twenties, and her daughter, Than, who was four years old at the time this study began. Together with other members of the family, both left Vietnam in the spring of 1975 aboard a helicopter which later landed on a United States naval ship. After a stop in the Philippines, the family arrived in the United States at a Vietnamese refugee center in mid-May of that year. For the next two months the family lived in the Vietnamese environment of the camp. Neither the mother nor the child knew any English at the time they re-settled in Texas in the summer of 1975.

For the mother, the shock of her abrupt departure from Vietnam and encounter with a culture so unfamiliar to her resulted in an almost complete withdrawal from any attempts to interact in English. She relied solely on her husband to act as interpreter when any communication in English was required even though for the first few weeks in San Antonio she and her family lived in the home of a sponsoring American family, which included one of the investigators of this study. Communication among all family members continued in Vietnamese exclusively. It was not until the fall of 1976, more than a year after settling in Texas, that the mother accepted employment locally, which forced her to start attempting to communicate in English. At no time, however, did she ever have any formal lessons in English.

Than, the daughter, had only minimal exposure to English during her first six months in Texas. Acquisition of English did not actually begin for her until age 4,6 when she returned to live in the home of the American sponsoring family for purposes of this study for a period of 9 weeks. This time she was alone, away from her family and a Vietnamese environment. Besides living with her American sponsors and playing with their child about her age, she was enrolled in a nursery school which provided extensive opportunity for interacting with English-speaking peers.

The Vietnamese family and their sponsors have remained in close contact, permitting data-gathering sessions in this on-going study.

PROCEDURE

In order to compare the acquisition longitudinally of a set of structures with the difficulty order reported for child ESL learners in the cross-sectional study by Dulay and Burt (1974) and adults by Krashen (1977), the following set of grammatical markers was investigated: 1) progressive -ing, 2) contractible copula, 3) auxiliary, 4) short plural, 5) article the/a, 6) 3rd person singular.

Scoring procedures followed those outlined by Dulay and Burt (1974, 42-43) for obligatory contexts. The copula and auxiliary were limited to the third person singular, plural to the regular /s,z/ short forms, and third person singular to the present tense of regular verbs. Only morphemes with at least ten obligatory occasions in the data were included. The ratio of actual realizations to potential occurrences was calculated for each morpheme. Overgeneralizations or ambiguous contexts were excluded.

In order to provide a sufficient number of obligatory occasions for

the various structures, weekly samples of spontaneous natural speech were tape recorded after both the mother and daughter had passed through an initial period of L2 acquisition. For the child, this was by the end of the 9-week stay with the host family. For the mother, this was after several months of employment. For purposes of examining longitudinal development of specific structures, two stages were identified for each subject. For the mother, Stage 1 covers the first 8 weeks of a six-month period of weekly free speech samples; Stage 2 covers the last 8 weeks of this period. For the daughter, Than, Stage 1 covers the last three weeks of the time during which she lived alone with her sponsoring American family and Stage 2, a year after the onset of English language acquisition. During the intervals between the two stages for both mother and daughter any development of English occurs while both live together in a Vietnamese-speaking home. The mother's interaction in English is, in large measure, limited to her work situation over the six month period involving Stages 1 and 2 while Than's is limited to experiences in the kindergarten in which she was enrolled for six months preceding Stage 2.

RESULTS

Analysis of Than's free speech samples for the two intervals examined gives a difficulty order for the six morphemes. Table 1 summarizes the percent of realizations as determined from the ratio of actual to potential occurrences.

TABLE 1

SEQUENCING OF MORPHEMES IN CHILD FREE SPEECH

Morpheme	Stage 1 accuracy	Stage 2 accuracy
-ing	0.73	0.90
copula	0.60	1.00
plural	0.25	0.87
article	0.26	1.00
auxiliary	0.30	0.41
III singular	0.12	0.08

Structures consistently evidence development over time but not at an even pace for each. If one accepts the 0.9 criterion level for rule acquisition, progressive -ing, copula, and article appear to have been stabilized by Stage 2. The plural is also closely approximating the 0.9 criterion. Still not internalized are rules for the auxiliary and III singular. The apparent discrepancy in the latter may be reflective of an earlier period of overgeneralization of this morpheme found in Stage 1 but eradicated by Stage 2, at which time acquisition of the rule seems to be rudimentary.

Table 2 gives the order of acquisition of the six structures for the mother for the two stages over a six-month period.

TABLE 2

SEQUENCING OF MORPHEMES IN ADULT FREE SPEECH

Morpheme	Stage 1 accuracy	Stage 2 accuracy
-ing	0.53	0.54
copula	0.52	0.51
plural	0.50	0.50
article	0.29	0.46
auxiliary	0.10	0.25
III singular	0.09	0.21

One striking relationship between the stages for the mother, unlike that for the child, is relative stability of the rules. Although there is some quantifiable progress in regard to the article, auxiliary and III singular, the overall pattern shows relatively little change over the six-month period in which the mother was interacting daily in English in her work situation.

DISCUSSION

In comparing the two stages of the mother with those of the young daughter, the lack of change in the mother's acquisition level as opposed to that of the child is readily evident. This may, in fact, represent affective variables operating negatively for the mother, who continued to find adjustment to her new way of life difficult, and positively for the child, who needed English for peer relationships. During the time interval between the child's two stages, a re-ordering of structures can be observed as various rules of the interlanguage develop. This is particularly evident for acquisition of the article, which moved from

fourth to first place in the order of difficulty. Clearly, the daughter's Stage 2 represents a higher level of L2 proficiency than that of the mother at either of her two stages. Of particular interest, however, for the mother-daughter relationship is the similarity between the child's first stage and the two stages of the mother. The one obvious difference is the later acquisition of the plural marker for the child, a predictable variation in terms of the differences in cognitive development. At age 4,6 the concept of plurality may have been rudimentary for the child but developed over the year.

Not reflected in the difficulty order of morphemes but evident in the data was the difference between Stage 1 and 2 for the mother in terms of self-correction. During Stage 1, no attempts to self-correct were made. However, during Stage 2 the process is operative extensively, as in the following examples:

1) plural: three day -uh- days

2) copula: He very happy now - he's very happy now

3) III singular: He go -uh- goes to kindergarten

Because of low frequency, the possessive N + N structure was not included in this study. However, with the limited data available the same process can be observed. For Stage 1 the possessive marker appeared to be almost absent. By Stage 2 corrections as She was Pham - Pham's friend appeared. At neither stage is the process of self-correction employed by the child.

Another difference observed in the free speech samples was the mother's clear use of past tense and future tense contexts even though she categorically avoided the overt markers required by English rules.

Statements such as Yesterday I buy shoes and You tell me and I buy for you indicate the mother conceptually operated in these temporal frameworks. No attempts to talk about the past or the future were evidenced in the child's early data. Again, such differences may well attest to cognitive rather than linguistic levels of development.

In comparing various stages of L2 acquisition over time, it can be observed that fluctuations occur as various rules of the interlanguage develop. Even though variable performance is a fact in syntax acquisition, findings in this study suggest that constraints operate on the individual's performance. Furthermore, the mother's Stage 2 and the daughter's Stage 1 appear to be strikingly similar, with the exception of differences attributable to conceptual development. This finding longitudinally is supportive of cross-sectional studies of child and adult L2 acquisition.

Table 3 compares a cross-sectional order for adults (Krashen, 1977) and for children (Dulay and Burt, 1974) with Stages 1 and 2 for the mother and child.

TABLE 3

COMPARISON OF CHILD AND ADULT ORDERS:

CROSS-SECTIONAL (CS) AND LONGITUDINAL

Morpheme	Adults CS[a]	Lan-1	Lan-2	Than-1	Than-2	Child CS[b]
copula	1	2	2	2	1.5	2
-ing	2	1	1	1	3	3
plural	3	3	3	5	4	4
article	4	4	4	4	1.5	1
auxiliary	5	5	5	3	5	5
III singular	6	6	6	6	6	6

[a]Krashen, 1977.

[b]Dulay and Burt, 1974.

In comparing stages in a longitudinal study with ordering for cross-sectional samples, the acquisition level of the group as a whole will affect the ordering. Table 3 indicates that the mother observes the same ordering as that for the adult group, although her level of proficiency is somewhat lower. At Stage 1, the child's order is also similar to that of the mother and the cross-sectional group of adults. The re-ordering, however, that occurs between Stage 1 and 2 for the child brings the child's Stage 2 in close approximation to that of the cross-sectional sample of children. It may be, then, that differences in ordering for cross-sectional samples of children and adults reflect the weighted input from individuals at different stages of development.

CONCLUSIONS

The language development exhibited by the mother and child in this study was clearly the product of language acquisition since neither had ever received any formal instruction or participated in any language learning situations. Evidence from the free speech data indicates that adult acquisition is very similar to child acquisition, with differences suggestive of variations in cognitive and neurological development. One explanation for the slower rate of acquisition observed for the mother is the role of affective variables and the retarding effect of negative attitudes arising from difficult adjustments to a new culture.

The sequence of acquisition observed longitudinally appears to corroborate that observed in cross-sectional studies of both children and adults, supporting the notion of similarity in language processing between children and adults.

In an earlier study (Kessler and Idar, 1977), we argued for similarity between the longitudinal study of the Vietnamese child Than's acquisition of English as a second language and Brown's study of first language acquisition of English. By extension, we also argue that the similarity between the child's and mother's acquisition of English L2 rests on underlying strategies common to the language acquisition process itself, both first and second.

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